



# IAN CALCUTT LOOKS AT "A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 4: THE DREAM MASTER" IN RELATION TO ITS PREDECESSORS

"Did you ever take a look at our town's history? It's not exactly a safe place to be a teenager." That understated observation comes from Rick, a character in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* as a number of his friends begin "dropping like flies." No need to explain who is responsible as it seems you just can't keep a bad man down. No sooner than you can say "Bastard son of a hundred maniacs", than that old child-killer Freddy Krueger is brought back to terrorize the younger inhabitants of Elm Street.

Continuing on directly from the events of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* part 3: *Dream Warriors*, Renny Harlin's *The Dream Master* seems very much influenced by its predecessors, especially its most recent forerunner. This is perhaps inescapable in a film which is a third sequel, but after about halfway through its running time the movie begins to develop a style of its own. On reflection the film as a whole is slightly more impressive than *Dream Warriors* and closer to Wes Craven's original in its dark, relentlessly grim feel (somewhat similar to Harlin's assured debut *Prison*).

*Elm Street 4* begins very much like *Dream Warriors*, a literary quotation before the titles, someone involved in craftwork (in this case pastel drawing instead of model-making), the swift introduction to the house at No.1428 Elm Street and the appearance of a little girl, the same little girl in fact (played by Kristen Clayton). The character of Kristen Parker, a survivor of *Dream Warriors*, also returns, though unfortunately not this time played by the stunning Patricia Arquette. Her place is taken by the oddly named and less capable Tuesday Knight (what did her parents do - get her time of birth mixed-up with the name on the certificate?).

Kristen enters the dark house and finds hanging, clanking chains (Harlin must have seen *Hellraiser*). She's been worrying about Freddy, "He's coming back for us" she tells

her fellow *Dream Warriors* compatriots Kincaid (Ken Sagoes) and Joey (Rodney Eastman). They try to persuade her otherwise but Kristen's fears do not stop.

Into one of her dreams she drags Kincaid plus his pet dog. Kincaid finds himself in the junkyard where Krueger's remains were laid to rest. In what is certainly the most ridiculous scene in the movie, Kincaid's dog pisses flames onto the ground; this opens up to reveal Freddy's bones which then proceed to reassemble themselves and gain flesh and blood in quick succession until Krueger is complete again, "You shouldn't have buried me, I'm not dead" he says. (Judging by this scene Harlin has definitely seen *Hellraiser*). Still, this is a dream so anything is possible, but as we already know, dreams on Elm Street can be less than healthy.

We are then introduced to Alice Johnson (Lisa Wilcox), a weird but curiously attractive girl inclined to occasional daydreams as well as now experiencing the same nightmares as Kristen about Freddy. With Lisa Wilcox as the new heroine, the tradition of strong female leads in the *Nightmare* movies continues (tactfully disregarding *Freddy's Revenge*, that is).

The reunited threesome from *Dream Warriors* seem weaker now. Kincaid soon dies, and Joey is taken-in by exactly the same ploy used by Freddy before. Remember the 'Nurse' scene and the tongues? Well this time the sexually over-imaginative kid sees a nude "Playboy" model disappear from his wall-poster to appear in solid form swimming inside his transparent water-bed. She then turns into Freddy and pulls him down. "How's this for a wet dream?" he says as Joey drowns inside his own water-bed. This also recalls Glen's bed-death in the first film.

Tuesday Knight's final moment quickly comes as Freddy sends Kristen off to the boiler-room while sleeping during the small hours (of Wednesday morning presumably!). "It's his fuckin' dinner and I'm the

last course" she screams at her mum who has secretly given her sleeping pills. Another nursery rhyme has been referred to, one which mentions the "Dream Master". Alice has told Kristen about its theory of "dreaming of some place fun". Kristen tries to use it when her nightmare comes on; she ends up on a beach, but Freddy's glove is seen cutting through the waves like something out of *Jaws*. His full self materializes (complete with trendy dark glasses!) and it's exit Kristen - through the sand and into the boiler. She dies in her burning bedroom before Alice (who witnessed the dream) can get to her.

Like the parents of Alice's predecessors (Kristen, Jesse Walsh and Nancy Thompson), her father is seen as out of touch with her, and her brother Rick's, needs. Alice, again like Nancy and Jesse before her, falls asleep in school. And like Kristen, as Alice dreams she pulls in her friend, the eccentric Sheila (Toy Newkirk) who suffers from asthma and dies as a result of the terrifying nightmare.

The actual pulling of people into dreams was a device used extensively in the plot of *Dream Warriors*. Co-writer and director Chuck Russell had used this idea before in *Dreamscape* which he also co-wrote. The Freddy-snake recalls a similar transformation effect in *Dreamscape*. The teenage trauma clinic is also much like the research establishment in the same film (something copied again by *Bad Dreams*, a blatant *Dream Warriors* rip-off which even uses one of the cast - Jennifer Rubin). Here the attitudes of unsympathetic or uncaring parents towards teenage sleep problems (which featured heavily in the first two *Nightmare* films) are instead represented by other narrow-minded authoritarian figures such as Dr Elizabeth Simms (Pricilla Pointer).

Here also, Freddy's murders are disguised as "suicides", not out of place in such a hospital. The doc-





tors' theory that the kids' nightmares are "by-products of guilt, psychological scars stemming from moral conflicts and overt sexuality" is evidence of the Elm Street films' increasing sexual frankness.

The original movie featured either conventional amorous teenage exploits or a kind of simple innocence. Nancy's friend Glen (Johnny Depp) makes a nice comment to himself as he lies alone in bed listening to Tina (Amanda Wyss) and Rod (Nick Corri) making love: "Morality sucks!". When Glen is dispensed of by Freddy, Nancy's phone sprouts an obscene, probing tongue as his voice tells her "I'm your boyfriend now." Freddy's Revenge delved briefly into the world of S&M with the sadistic sports coach Schneider who tortures Jesse (but then all sports teachers are like that aren't they?).

A more sinister variation appears in *Dream Warriors* when the ex-junkie Taryn (Jennifer Rubin) is killed in her dream. Freddy's famous finger-knives appear instead as four hypodermic needles; "We're old friends you and I" he says as he penetrates Taryn's awaiting needle-holes. This is a double metaphor, the second analogy is obvious as Freddy ecstatically ejects the serum into his victim with orgasmic delight. Krueger is therefore much more than a run-of-the-mill bogeyman. He is now becoming a symbol for the "evils" of sex and drugs (rock 'n' roll comes later with Dokken's end theme song!).

This fact, plus his ability to send people off to Hell or retain and feed off his dead child-victims' souls, point at a much more powerful, supernatural ability in Freddy. *Dream Warriors* contains the most mysticism of the entire series. But some of this is a little corny, such as the ghostly apparition of Krueger's mother and Freddy's vampire-like meltdown by Holy Water and a crucifix. Freddy's actual role is much more fully defined in the fourth film, particularly during its astonishing last half (of which more later).

In *Dream Warriors* the kids continue the practice of sleep guarding. Perhaps the best feature of the movie is that the nightmares of each person so clearly reflect the individual's personality, their strengths or fears (the kid with the wheelchair, the boy with the mannequin, etc). There is a stronger fantasy element within the dreams, but there is little of the ambiguous 'cross-over' of reality into nightmare which was so well done in the original film. *Dream Warriors* seems more brightly lit and has a much greater use of optical effects on top of the usual make-up/mechanical FX.

The soundtrack skilfully re-uses Charles Bernstein's haunting theme from the first *Nightmare* - as does *The Dream Master*. Chuck Russell's film is stylish but not very atmospheric. As well as its own *Nightmare* sources (understandable as Wes Craven was a co-writer), it is highly derivative of other movies:



writing appearing on skin (*The Exorcist*), voices from a TV set (*Poltergeist*) and a fighting skeleton (*The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*).

Back a little further to the odd one out and worst of the crop, Jack Sholder's *A Nightmare on Elm Street part 2: Freddy's Revenge*. Sholder's feature debut was *Alone in the Dark* (1982), a superior 'stalk and slash' film (a glimpse of which can be seen in *Dream Warriors* on the TV just before Zsa Zsa Gabor is interviewed by Dick Cavett), and Sholder's latest, *The Hidden*, is excellent.

So what is wrong with *Freddy's Revenge*? The main problem is that it betrays the spirit of the original, key elements which are repeated to good effect in both *Nightmare 3* and *4* without tedium. For a start there are no 'shared nightmares', Jesse Walsh (Mark Patton) is the only person who dreams about Freddy and there are virtually no dream/fantasy sequences at all (except for the amazing opening). By making everything so concentrated on one character and by dealing with standard possession rather than nightmares perhaps the makers were hoping this would be a more terrifying, 'can't get away from it' situation. However, it is not original enough to be interesting and the effects show the restrictions of the budget.

On the positive side Jesse is a good, unorthodox hero (like Alice in *The Dream Master*). And *Freddy's Revenge* does provide Robert Englund with his first of several extra roles: the school bus driver (this was followed in *Dream Warriors* by the nurse and Dick Cavett transformations, and look out for another nurse, a doctor and a school teacher in *The Dream Master*). The film also provides Freddy with his first comic line (the first of many). Freddy's response to a jerk who tries to soft-talk him out of attacking by

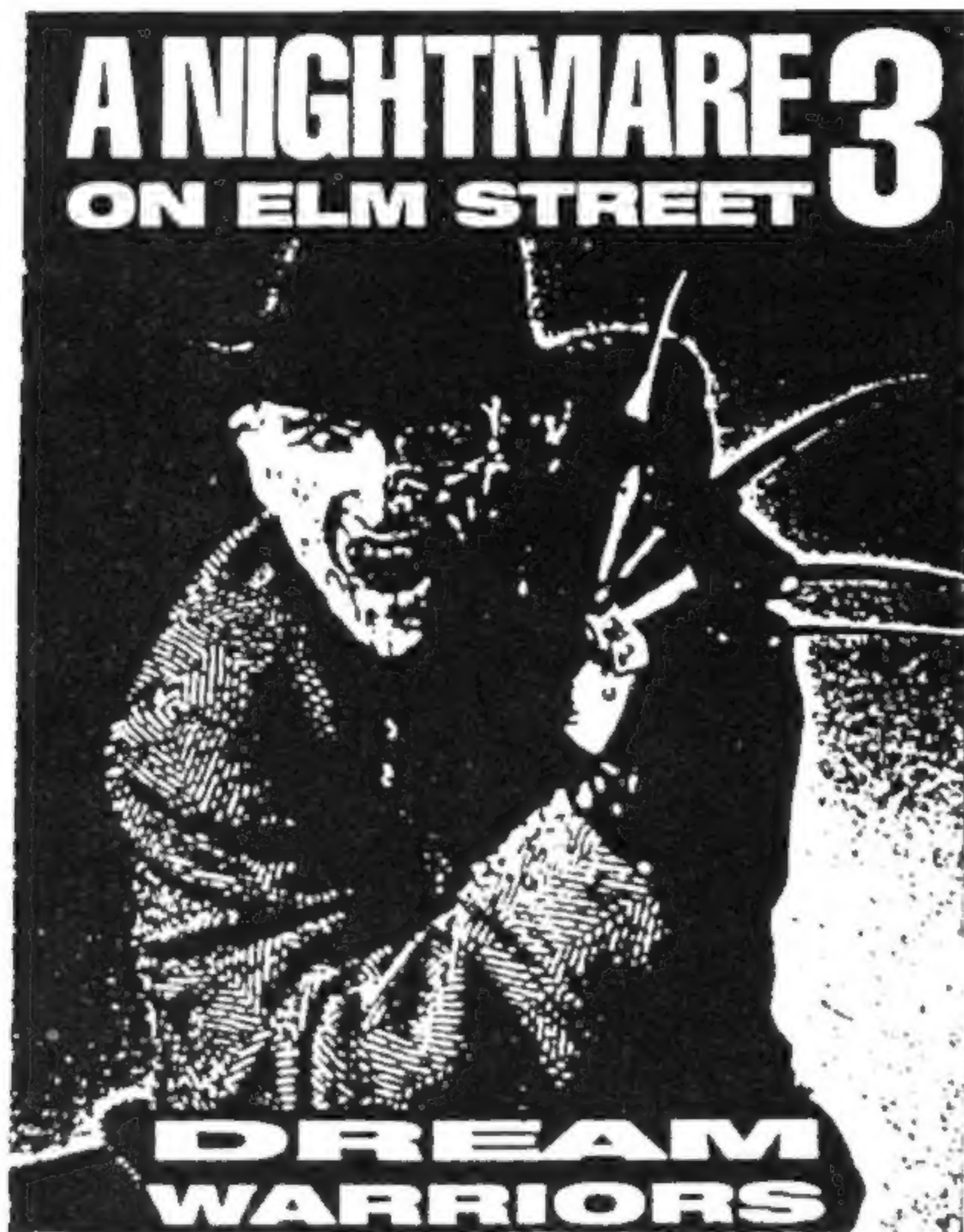
offering help is: "Help yourself, fucker!" as he slashes him across the neck.

The film almost gives us our first sight of a truly young child becoming a victim of Freddy - though acting through Jesse as he enters his little sister's room at night, battling with the incestuous thoughts; but it shies away from going too far. It is perhaps strange that the ghost of the killer of small children should be terrorizing teenagers instead, but I suppose the sight of twelve year old brats battling with Krueger in *Monster Squad* fashion would be rather implausible. Anyway, the films know their audience, and they know that by taking advantage of teenage sexual/despondency problems they will strike a chord in many of the viewers.

Wes Craven's original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is now rightly seen as a classic. The *Nightmare* movies have often been labelled as "Slasher" films, even by such genre luminaries as Clive Barker and David Cronenberg. Looking at some of the makers' backgrounds this isn't surprising. Craven collaborated with Sean S. Cunningham on *Last House on the Left*, and Cunningham went on to create the *Friday the Thirteenth* movies. And Jack Sholder of *Freddy's Revenge* edited *The Burning* and directed *Alone in the Dark*.

*Freddy's Revenge* is closer to a standard slasher film because it lacks the dream elements, but many people seem to have overlooked the enormous supernatural/fantasy components which characterize the *Nightmare on Elm Streets*. Even the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* movies contain a certain amount of the supernatural (especially the latter with its numbers 6 and 7). True slasher films are *The Prowler* aka *Rosemary's Killer*, *Prom Night*, *My Bloody Valentine* and the like.





A Nightmare on Elm Street is actually an ingenious hybrid of the slasher genre (with its 'set-piece' deaths) and nightmare/delusion movies such as *Un Chien Andalou*, *Dead of Night* (1945), *Repulsion* and *Eraserhead*. Craven has perfected the seamless 'real life into dream' situation, the chillingly ambiguous scenes which mean that neither the characters or the viewers know what is real or imagined (notice how cleverly Freddy's boiler room seems to get closer to the Thompson house in dream-locale as there are fewer kids left). Wes Craven also knows about our worst fears such as drowning, particularly in something ordinary and apparently harmless like a bathtub. He knows about dreams too; trying to run but not being able to is a common dream event - such as when Nancy (Heather Langenkamp) tries to run up stairs which dissolve into porridge-like slime. Sequences like this were repeated in *Dream Warriors*, including the 'bathroom terrors' - a tap turning into Freddy's glove.

Langenkamp perfectly portrays the troubles of youth; one of the best lines comes after Nancy's second night without sleep: "God, I look twenty years old"(!). *Nightmares* 1, 3 and 4 are really Rites of Passage movies where the heroines, usually young and inexperienced, have to discover hidden strengths to battle against evil.

Craven also uses other Classical themes; reappearing ghosts which signify something important (Tina's decaying body in the first film, Amanda Krueger in the third), worries about madness, a lust for vengeance (Freddy's spirit) and unending carnage are all elements of the Revenge Tragedies as performed by the Greeks, Romans and Elizabethans. This is backed up by a choice quote in the first film from the greatest of all tragedies "Hamlet", "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

The dream cross-over is more powerful in the first film. Whereas

Kristen and Alice can pull people into dreams in *Nightmares* 3 and 4 respectively, Nancy can actually pull people and things out, such as Freddy's fedora hat and Krueger himself at the end (the use of anti-personnel devices is, incidentally, similar to Craven's *Last House on the Left*). Likewise, Freddy can effect reality from beyond the realm of dreams; he makes Nancy's phone grow a tongue and kills Mrs Thompson when both she and Nancy are awake.

The worst thing about the movie is its ending, arbitrarily tacked-on for 'shock value', it quite honestly makes no sense. The rest of the Elm Street films have suffered from this too with the notable exception of *Nightmare on Elm Street 4* which hints at, but avoids a trick ending.

What is pleasing about the latest addition to the series is that it manages to successfully expand the general Elm Street mythology without going to as many corny lengths as *Dream Warriors*. As each of the victims die their souls pass to Freddy, but it seems that Krueger is not content with just revenge on the Elm Street children, he wants to continue his old ways of killing kids just for the pleasure of it.

However, Freddy's increased appetite is counterbalanced by Alice. She has a particular gift, more special than Kristen's ability to pull people into dreams. She actually stores up her dead friends' talents as each of them die. The rhyme of the "Dream Master" tells of a positive and negative dream gate. When dreams pass into the negative gate they become nightmares (this is nothing to do with the allegory of the Ivory and Bone Gates of Dreams by the way). It turns out that because of her ability, Alice is the Dream Master and the guardian of the Positive Gate.

"Welcome to Wonderland, Alice" says Freddy as Alice confronts Krueger at last in his "wonderful world" of nightmares. "You've got their power, I've got their souls" says Freddy, and I suppose it's only right that as Alice guards the Positive Gate, Freddy guards the Negative one: "I've been guarding my Gate for a long time, bitch!" he growls. This is a truly original touch and it keeps the *Nightmare* films firmly in the territory of metaphysical fantasy.

The special effects are superb, with a scene guaranteed to put you off pizzas for life, a really horrendous "insect transformation" and a marvellous Freddy death-scene, though big profits on *The Dream Master* will ensure that he returns, ("I am eternal" he says) but I just think it will be difficult to top this one.

The fact that Freddy Krueger has become a kind of cult, anti-hero for being a child-killer has worried some people (like Alexander Walker for example). But this isn't Wes Craven's fault, he invented Freddy but gave him little charisma. The only characteristic he had to start with was his neat line in self-mutilation (extending his arms, cutting off his fingers, slashing

open his chest, etc). Somehow his character has built and he is now a master of the witty one-liner too. He is becoming a person and not just a 'mad killer' - alive or dead. Among so many constantly changing "typical" teenagers, Freddy is bound to stand out; as Derek Malcom commented on the first film's release in 1985: "Perhaps my trouble was that I wanted the Evil One to win. I can't stand those awful kids." Freddy is the single constant image which represents the whole series, he is Evil personified. Throughout cinema history screen villains have always appeared forceful and compelling; we can't remember Dracula's victims but we'll never forget the Count himself.

Controversy has also arisen over so-called "copycat suicides" after *Dream Warriors*, but that can be dismissed along with all other "copycat" myths. And more recently there has been some fuss over the Freddy merchandising, kids playing with toy Freddy dolls and gloves etc. This is actually more ironic than sinister or worrying, and not nearly as bad as say "Action Man" toys which glorify war.

The worst thing about the merchandising (apart from being an example of greedy marketing of course!) is that it is a material creation of an ethereal being. We shouldn't be able to see or touch Freddy except in our dreams. Even by possessing a video copy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* he is still just an image, not touchable.

Time will tell whether Freddy's power as a screen demon will diminish over further sequels, but as they stand the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies make a fascinating collection, and Freddy's place in horror history alongside Dracula, the Wolfman and Mr Hyde is confirmed.

